Bertoli, Mariacristina Natalia. "The Borderland of Prosody: Theory and Practice of *Horizontverschmelzung* in Poetic Translation." *Translating America: Importing, Translating, Misrepresenting, Mythicizing, Communicating America. Proceedings of the 20th AISNA Biennial Conference.* Ed. M. Camboni, A. Carosso and S. Di Loreto. Torino: Otto Editore, 2010: 123-29.

23 September 1980 marked the turning point of translation studies, a discipline whose (unofficial) manifesto, *The Name and the Nature of Translation Studies* (1972), had been written just a few years earlier by James S. Holmes. On that date the Irish playwright Brian Friel premiered in Derry the pièce that is now regarded as his masterpiece, *Translations*, a play in which the role of translation has been radically questioned like never before. By staging the replacement of Irish toponyms with newly-coined English names the play presents translation as a double-edged weapon. On the one hand, it may play a gulf-bridging role in cultural mediation; on the other, it can be used as a means for dismantling the culture of the Other, as in the case of the English colonization of Ireland represented in the play. Thus, Friel's *Translations* has raised a doubt as to whether there exists any method to avoid the risk of fraudulent uses of translation.

Twenty years after *Translations*, in 2000, Anthony Pym worked out a viable solution to the barbed issue tackled by Friel through placing the concept of cooperation – which had already been elaborated by Justa Holz-Mänttäri – at the core of translation ethics (Holz-Mänttäri 1984, 177). To this purpose Pym developed a notion coined by Sperber and Wilson in 1995, the so-called "mutual cognitive environment" which the original author, the translator and the receptor audience should share (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 41). Accordingly, Pym identified this intersection between the cultural backgrounds of the participants in a communication act as the space for cooperation (Pym 2001, 181-82). Yet, this intersection alone proves not to be enough to actually

secure cooperation, for this space also needs be ruled by the so-called "principle of optimal relevance." Accordingly, cooperation is ensured in translation only when two basic conditions have been satisfied; these are the intersection of the participants' cognitive environments and their willingness to strive for relevance, which "is defined in terms of contextual effects and processing effort" (Wilson 1995, 198).

Interestingly, the space for cooperation fenced off by Pym roughly corresponds to one of the pivotal concepts of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, that is to say, *Horizontverschmelzung* or "fusion of horizons". *Horizontverschmelzung* is grounded in the question-answer process of the dialogue, for – as Gadamer claims – "the text must be understood as an answer to a real question" (Gadamer 1960, 367). Such a dialogical dynamics entails a close collaboration between the author and the reader, a collaboration which is made difficult by the fact that the author's contribution to the dialogue is *in absentia*. Notwithstanding this difficulty, collaboration is the very bedrock *Horizontverschmelzung* rests on, as explained in a key passage of *Truth and Method*:

> Hence the meaning of a text is not to be compared with an immovably and obstinately fixed point of view that suggests only one question to the person trying to understand it, namely how the other person could have arrived at such an absurd opinion. In this sense understanding is certainly not concerned with "understanding historically" – i.e., reconstructing the way the text came into being. Rather, one intends to *understand the text itself*. But this means that the interpreter's own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the text's meaning. In this the interpreter's own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into

> play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one's own what the text says. I have described this above as a "fusion of horizons." We can now see that this is what takes place in conversation, in which something is expressed that is not only mine or my author's, but common (Gadamer 1960, 390; author's emphasis).

Although Gadamer formulated the concept of *Horizontverschmelzung* within the context of textual exegesis, it is clear that it can also be applied to translation, which is primarily based on the interpretation of the source text on the translator's part. Gadamer himself clearly pinpointed the indissoluble connection between translation and interpretation when stating that:

> Here the translator must translate the meaning to be understood into the context in which the other speaker lives. This does not, of course, mean that he is at liberty to falsify the meaning of what the other person says. Rather, the meaning must be preserved, but since it must be understood within a new language world, it must establish its validity within it in a new way. Thus every translation is at the same time an interpretation. We can even say that the translation is the culmination of the interpretation that the translator has made of the words given him (Gadamer 1960, 386).

Thus, *Horizontverschmelzung* turns out to be the construction of an in-between space where the translator is invested with the role of a cultural intermediary enabling the author and the reader to cooperate effectively in communication. Hatim and Mason have accordingly defined the translator as an authentic mediator who – by means of his/her linguistic skills – is capable of healing the breach between two different cultures:

> We hope to have shown that the translator stands at the center of this dynamic process of communication, as a mediator between the producer of a source text and whoever are its TL [translation] receivers. The translator is first and foremost a mediator between two parties for whom mutual communication might otherwise be problematic […] (Hatim and Mason 1990, 223).

Gadamer's concept of *Horizontverschmelzung* entails a cooperation that proves a guarantee against the risk of manipulative uses of translation. Yet, how to actually achieve that cooperation *Horizontverschmelzung* is grounded in? The answer seems to lie in Leo Hickey's concept of perlocutionary equivalence. Hickey's starting point is the speech act as was formulated in the 1950s by John Austin, who defined communication as the result of the interplay between three different acts:

1- Locutionary act (the very act of uttering a message);

2- Illocutionary act (the act one performs through uttering a message, i.e. asking a question, apologizing, greeting, etc.);

3- Perlocutionary act (the effect a message has on its recipient, such as persuading or frightening)[1].

Hickey's contention is that, just as the source text can virtually produce one (or more) perlocutionary effects on its source readers, likewise its translation should, in turn, produce analogous perlocutionary effects on its target readership (Hickey 1998, 219).

However, if recreating the perlocutionary effects of a given text in translation is difficult, reconstructing them in poetic translation is all the more challenging. As Jean Cohen explains in *Structure du langage poétique,* the peculiarity of poetry dwells in its deviations from standard language and common usage. Obviously, these deviations

(such as rhymes, prosody, as well as any other phonetic and rhetorical device used in poetry) are not designed for the mere sake of aesthetics, but are also meant to convey a covert meaning, that is to say, a connotative one. Cohen underlines that denotation and connotation cannot coexist on the same level, and argues that the distinctiveness of poetry lies precisely in its proclivity for connotation, which calls for a greater interpretive effort than is normally required by prose (Cohen 1966, 214). Thus, the intrinsic ambiguity of the poetic text stimulates one or more perlocutionary responses on the reader's part which the translation of the text should stimulate as well, although through different means likely to have an equivalent perlocutionary effect on the target readership. In order to attain this perlocutionary equivalence, the translator is allowed (if not expected) to deviate from literalness when translating poetry, as Michael Holman and Jean Boase-Beier explain:

> […] Just as the language of an original literary text will creatively deviate from standard language, so the translator can regard the original as a standard to deviate from, and the extent to which deviation is perceived will vary according to the cultural context in which the TT [Translation Text] is to be embedded (Holman and Boase-Beier 1999, 13).

So, *Horizontverschmelzung* occurs in the translator's recreation of the source text. As the translator seeks to attain perlocutionary equivalence, he/she performs what André Lefevere calls a "rewriting" of the original[2].

The ideal of perlocutionary *Horizontverschmelzung* was the guiding principle for my approach to the translation of some poems by the contemporary American author Mary Jo Salter[3]. She is commonly labeled as a New Formalist poet on account of her penchant for regular metrical structures, as well as for her fondness of puns and word

plays. Although this label is arguable, it is nonetheless grounded in two distinctive traits of her style which I have endeavored to recreate in my translations. My goal was to have the Italian readership grasp and respond to the implied meanings her poetry is fraught with as American readers would do – according to my interpretation of the texts, of course. Two examples will help me elucidate what I mean by perlocutionary equivalence in the translation of her poetry.

The first example is "Young Girl Peeling Apples," a poem which is at the same time a calligram and an ekphrasis, being the description of a canvas by the 17th-century Dutch painter Nicolaes Maes that Salter views as the perfect pun. In effect, the text describes the painting in terms of a visual pun on the girl who peels apples and her being the "apple" of the painter's eye; this parallel is drawn by the metaphor depicting her clothes as apple peels, as well as by the implicit simile of her "apple- / round head" (ll. 5-6). In turn, the girl's roundness is transfigured into a metaphor for the world itself, which – in its ceaseless flux of change and transformation – goes round in a spiral of "making while unmaking" (l. 28) epitomized in the detail of the apple peel dangling from the girl's hand.

Not only are the fluctuations of reality described verbally in the text; they are also rendered visually thanks to the use of the serpentine line, which Salter creates both through the shape of the poem and through its language. On the level of language, this effect is achieved through the juxtaposition of pairs of antonyms such as *tightly* vs. *loose, red* vs. *white, fills* vs. *falls empty, knife* vs. *life*, culminating in the image of the spiral of "making while unmaking." The key idea of fluctuation is also expressed on the level of phonetics through such alliterations as "apron that *fills* and *falls* / empty" (ll. 15-16; my emphasis), which have been recreated and reinforced in the Italian sentence "*grava* il suo *grembiule*, poi con *scosse* / lo *svuota*". In addition, the expression "the world goes round" (l. 29) reminds the reader of the apple's shape as well as of the girl's,

who is herself the *apple* of the painter's eye. The rhymes (such as *pun/bun*, *knife/life, unbroken/spoken*) further reinforce this implicit parallel.

Ignoring these formal aspects of the poem wouldn't simply entail spoiling its beauty, but distorting its very meaning, which lies less in its contents than in the formal devices used for conveying them. I have therefore endeavored to recreate the whole poem with a view to conveying the punning connotations of the source text. So, for example, in my translation the girl isn't the apple of the painter's eye anymore, for the equivalent idiomatic expression in Italian would have been "la luce dei suoi occhi" ("the light of his eyes"); rather, she has been turned into a "mela del peccato" ("an apple of sin"), which conveys the idea of what the painter feels for her while maintaining the punning image of the "apple-girl".

The second example, "Costanza Bonarelli," is once again a peculiar punning ekphrasis. The poem describes the bust of the sculptor Bernini's eponymous lover, and it presents the clash between the unfaithful living Costanza and the perfect marble one in terms of an implicit pun on the double meaning of the word *lie*. The sculpted Costanza stands for its sexual meaning, for although her sensuality is overt, it is made honest by the truthfulness Bernini projects on her; by contrast, the real Costanza is an unfaithful woman, so that her *lying* with other men is always a *lie*.

The clash between the marble lover (which is the passive object of Bernini's creative power) and the flesh-and-blood woman (who is the active subject of her own decisions and actions) is also expressed from a linguistic point of view through the opposition between the past participle "designed" (referring to the statue), and the present participle "designing" (referring to the living Costanza). This is just one among a number of antithetical pairs creating the same serpentine line as in "Young Girl Peeling Apples:" *blind* vs. *gaze*, *parted* vs. *parting*, *designed* vs. *designing*, *undone* vs.

to-be-done-to, *inconstant* vs. *Costanza*, *true-to-life* vs. *untrue*, *coiled* vs. *loose*, *singular* vs. *two-faced*.

Since the sharp contrast between the living Costanza's unfaithfulness and the marble Costanza's perfection is the very gist of the poem, I have tried to recreate the language implicitly conveying this clash in my Italian translation as well. My chief concern has been to keep the antithetical pairs and the polyptotons shaping the poem's lexical serpentine line. In addition, since the work of art described in the poem belongs to the target readership's cultural background, I have stressed the "Italianness" of the subject by adding a local flavor to it.

For example, in the source text the disfigurement Bernini inflicts upon his lover in retaliation for her unfaithfulness is described in terms of a "Kilroy was here" (l. 49), an American popular culture expression which seems to have originated through United States servicemen, who – during the Second World War – would write it wherever they encamped. Of course, a literal translation of this expression wouldn't have made any sense in Italian, for in this case the source text author and the translation text reader lack a mutual cognitive environment ensuring reciprocal understanding. I have therefore tried to mediate between the two parts through replacing the original expression with an "equivalent" one, that is, the Italian idiom "Qui passò Garibaldi" ("Here passed Garibaldi"). Analogously to "Kilroy was here," this sentence refers to the commemoration tablets celebrating Garibaldi's passage with his troops during the Italian War of Independence: in consequence, the connotative meaning of the expression stays unchanged while being perfectly intelligible to the translation readership, as well as being even as much of an anachronism as "Kilroy was here" is.

Although they are not numerous, I hope that the examples given above may prove a thought-provoking contribution to current reflection on translation as a means for fostering inter-cultural dialogue. In effect, they foreground the practical difficulties

translators frequently encounter in their activity and, at the same time, prompt a concrete approach to the resolution of translation problems. What I have illustrated in these pages is not a method – a concept abhorred by Gadamer, for in his view method leads the seeker astray from the truth – based on rules and norms, but an attitude reposing on a few practical guidelines. These guidelines can be flexibly used for solving both linguistic and cultural problems in any kind of context and communicative situation. It is precisely this flexibility that promotes negotiation in the liminal territory of the text, thus enabling Gadamer's *Horizontverschmelzung* to be put into practice to the benefit of mutual understanding in both inter-cultural and inter-linguistic communication.

Notes

1. Locutory, illocutory and perlocutory acts are illustrated in detail in Austin John Langshaw (Cambridge, 1962).
2. The idea of translation as rewriting has been developed in Lefevere André (London - New York, 1992).
3. The poems referred to here have been selected from Mary Jo Salter's latest collection *A Phone Call to the Future* (New York, 2008). They are "A Case of Netsuke," "Young Girl Peeling Apples," "Wreckage," "Trompe l'œil," "Costanza Bonarelli" and "Poetry Slalom," whose translations have appeared in Bertoli Mariacristina Natalia (*Semicerchio* 40.1, 2009), 59-71.

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